Multilingualism and the City: The Construction of Urban Identities in Dakar (Senegal)

ELINE VERSLUYS
University of Antwerp

Abstract

Although place and language are two key elements in the composition of social identities, they are often studied in separate academic enterprises. This article brings them together, and examines their role in the construction of multiple urban identities. Analyzing how urbanites in Dakar shape their identities, I illustrate how linguistic and geographical criteria contribute to the formation of “we” versus “they” alliances, which in turn produce a specific sense of spatiality. Examining the case of the suburban neighborhood of Yoff, I show how residents construct fluid identities that range from “urbanites” to “village people,” each one of which is linked to a particular linguistic and cultural context. This article contributes to an understanding of how life in a multilingual city like Dakar offers a broad choice of identities that urban resident employ and maneuver on a daily level. [Keywords: Dakar, Senegal, multilingualism, urban identities]

Dakar: A Multicolored City

To examine different urban identities constructed by the inhabitants of Dakar, I analyzed data that are part of a larger research project on multilingualism and identity in Dakar, Senegal. This article examines how inhabitants from a suburban neighborhood in Dakar construct multiple identities in relation to their language use and linguistic attitudes. Research for this paper is based on several periods of ethnographic fieldwork conducted in the Dakar neighborhood of Yoff Mbuenguene from 2004 to 2006. While I lived in a family in this neighborhood, I became friends with individuals frequenting the streets around our house. Twenty-two of them participated in my research. These were mostly young people (male and female) between the ages of...
18 and 30, who all lived in Yoff Mbuenguene. The majority defined themselves as belonging to the Lebou ethnic group. Most came from middle class families. They had all gone to school to varying degrees; some had quit at the age of 12 and others currently attended university. All were able to communicate with me in French. We had informal talks, individual interviews and group discussions treating their lives in the neighborhood, their linguistic practices and their thoughts concerning the latter. The individual interviews were semi-structured, to gain as much information on what the interviewees were most interested in. Group conversations involved three or four participants who all knew each other. These talks were organized around five main theses on language issues which I brought up and which caused lively discussions. In these conversations my role as a researcher was important, the consequence of which is a co-construction of meaning rather than a neutral representation of the informants’ opinions. Finally, in performing a detailed discourse analysis of the transcribed interviews, I managed to define different identities that are constructed, and mechanisms that fostered their creation. In this paper I focus on a subsection of these identities, in particular those that are related to the urban context. I explore how inhabitants of Yoff claim their place in the city by constructing particular spatial identities, and how they relate these to their different language uses. In the following I will first introduce the urban context of Dakar and the sociolinguistic situation in Senegal, in general, and in Dakar, in particular. Next I provide a brief overview of theoretical issues concerning space as a social reality. This is followed by the analysis of my data where I illustrate the construction of spatial identities.

Dakar is estimated to have about two million inhabitants. Like many other African cities, Dakar has experienced extremely rapid urbanization in only a few decades. Founded in 1862 by French colonizers on the Cap-Vert peninsula, the city replaced Saint-Louis in 1902 as the capital of the federation of French colonies, AOF (l’Afrique Occidentale Française), and later of Senegal (Dreyfus and Juillard 2004). Since then the city has experienced several waves of population growth, of which the rural exodus during the drought in the 1970s was one of the most intensive. This trend still has not come to a halt, which causes considerable informal urbanization with newcomers settling in spontaneously formed neighborhoods. The city’s infrastructure is hard pressed to adapt to the every growing needs (Salem 1998; Figari 2000a). Globalization has played a significant role in this rapid urban growth. Rural immigrants are also attracted by the fact that Dakar constitutes a gateway to the world at large. Indeed a lot of the new houses and buildings are financed by expatriate Senegalese who invest their remittances back home. Overall the city is characterized by features of globalization such as international flows of people and goods which result in the articulation of very diverse influences.
Administrationally, the city of Dakar is composed of 19 communes d’arrondissement (districts), which can be grouped in three types. First there is the district of Le Plateau in the heart of the city. It constitutes the administrative and economic center of the city and the country. The second type consists of districts lying in the larger city center, such as la Médina, Colobane or Fann. The third type includes districts that are further removed from the city center. Some of them functioned as dormitory suburbs in earlier decades (Figari 2000b), but today they fulfill more complex roles in urbanites’ lives. A distinction can be made between densely populated neighborhoods such as Colobane and la Médina, and residential ones, such as Fann, les Almadies and Hann-Maristes. Both types of neighborhoods can be found in various areas of the peninsula and some are in close proximity to each other.⁴ Dakar includes very diverse spaces, from the high rise office buildings around the main city square to the sandy streets in the coastal areas; and from the bustling atmosphere in the popular neighborhoods to the calm of upscale residential quarters.

One of these spaces is the suburban neighborhood of Yoff. Situated at the northern end of the peninsula, it was originally a fishing village. In the course of Dakar’s rapid expansion, Yoff became a suburb. The quarter was and continues to be home to the Lebou ethnic group.⁵ The Lebou are known as a people of fishermen, who settled in the Western coastal areas of Senegal in the 15th and the 16th century after a long period of migration (Dumez 2000). Today they consider themselves the original inhabitants of the Cap-Vert peninsula, spread over different coastal localities such as Ouakam, N’Gor and Yoff. This identity explains their pride and the many discussions about land property they have with urban authorities. Today the Lebou are a minority in Dakar and aspects of their historical way of life are being threatened (Dreyfus and Juillard 2004). Low literacy rates and the less favorable image they often have in the eyes of other Senegalese, cause a feeling of marginalization among some Lebou. Yoff is still inhabited by a majority of Lebou, although migrants from other backgrounds have also settled there. Due to migration and the links the inhabitants have with the rest of Dakar, Yoff experiences dynamics of globalization that affect the entire metropolis.

Yoff can be subdivided into two sections, an “original” part, which is composed of eight “sub-neighborhoods,” and a new part, called “Yoff cité.” The participants in my study all lived in one of the original sub-neighborhoods called Yoff Mbuenguene. Walking through Yoff one can easily observe the many different elements that come together here. Yoff has links with other localities through urban transport (link to the city center) and cybercafés (link with the world). Simultaneously Yoff has managed to keep its local uniqueness. There is a daily informal fish market on the beach, many ethnic celebrations are organized and some inhabitants respect the Lebou religious rituals beside their Muslim faith.
The Lebou in Yoff have their own community organization, the “République de Yoff.” This “republic” has a president (the djarafo), ministers, juridical system and police corps. In Yoff influences from different cultural universes merge.\(^6\)

Like elsewhere in Africa, the sociolinguistic situation of Senegal is marked by a high degree of multilingualism. A typical aspect of this multilingualism is its postcolonial character in which one European language, in this case French, has remained the official state language. In addition to this official language, Senegal recognizes six national languages, all of them West-African (Wolof, Sereer, Pulaar, Diola, Mandingue and Soninké). Whereas French still is of central importance in administration, education, written media and parts of broadcasting, the other national languages are meant to be gradually implemented in education and the media. This is happening quite successfully in broadcast media, with news reports in the six national languages, and many other programs in Wolof. However, the implementation in educational contexts remains in an experimental phase. Here, the use of national languages does not transcend a handful of primary school pilot projects. Some analysts point to a lack of political will as the main reason for this failure. Wolof, the mother tongue of a large Wolof ethnic group,\(^7\) nonetheless, managed to develop into the vehicular language in Senegal. Many other Senegalese speak it as a second language. About 80 percent of the population can speak or passively understand Wolof (Swigart 2001) which is mostly used in informal situations, but is increasingly introduced into official settings. A growing number of media broadcasting is done in Wolof. Some observers look at the rise of Wolof as threatening the privileged position of French in Senegal (Thiam 1992; Calvet 1994; Swigart 2001).

In urban centers language takes on a specific form, often called Urban Wolof, which is defined by Swigart (1992) as an unmarked form of code switching between Wolof and French. Yet the term code switching is misleading here, since it mostly refers to a very restricted way of combining codes. As McLaughlin (2001) rightly observes, the reality of combining French and Wolof in urban Senegal is much more complex than what conventional accounts of code switching or code mixing describe. Urban Wolof can be considered a collective entity that represents a whole range of Wolof-French combinations, from predominantly Wolof speech containing some French loan words or vice versa, to a code where the two languages are both lexically and grammatically thoroughly intertwined. In Senegal’s cities, speaking Urban Wolof is a central strategy in adapting to urban life and the code is more and more becoming the indicator of a newly emerging, de-ethnicized urban identity (McLaughlin 2001; Cruise O’Brien 1998).

In a metropolis like Dakar this multilingualism is intensively visible. Rapid urbanization causes a range of profound social changes, making Dakar into a bustling place where multiple cultural spheres
interact. Beside the Urban Wolof code a variety of Senegalese languages is spoken by rural immigrants who come to the city in search of job opportunities and better living conditions. Although many of them tend to lose their ethnic language in their efforts to integrate into the city life, others continue to speak their mother tongue beside the Urban Wolof variant. In addition to Senegalese languages and French there are now also languages like English that arrived with increasing globalization, Arabic, used in Muslim religious contexts, and other African languages brought to Dakar by immigrants from neighboring and other countries.

In Yoff multilingualism evolved around three poles: French, Urban Wolof and Lebou, which is a Wolof dialect. With regard to the use of French, informants confirmed that the language finds itself in the same situation as other official languages in Africa: French has a highly institutionalized status, but is spoken on few occasions. These occasions are mainly official ones: French is said to be used in administration, education and formal employment. However, many informants also state that they could not do without French in less formal contexts, especially for conversations on certain topics (philosophy, the news) and for communication with non-Wolof speaking Senegalese and foreigners. Urban Wolof is the language variety stated to be the most used one, spoken in daily interactions in the neighborhood and with friends and family. Finally, Lebou is cited as a language used for specific situations, such as conversations with elderly people or for jokes. The mixing of languages is a common phenomenon in this multilingual setting. Languages and their uses find themselves in a sort of continuous line ranging between different shades. At the two extremes we find the highest degrees of linguistic purity, the line beginning with a very “uncontaminated” form of French, then fading into several mixed forms of French and Wolof. These varieties of Urban Wolof in turn pass into purer forms of the ethnic language where the French elements are taken out, finally arriving at a more pure Lebou or Wolof. Yet the pure extremes are rarely encountered in Senegal. The line thus evolves from a “foreign” language to “indigenous” Senegalese languages. These dynamics between foreign and indigenous languages play a central role in the construction of the different urban identities. Before examining how these linguistic criteria are used to construct a spatial identity, I will take a closer look at the notion of space.

The Social Construction of Space

Poststructuralist theory in social sciences and philosophy has adopted the concept of social realities as active constructions of the self, rather than independently existing entities outside of it. Based on ideas of Derrida and Foucault, many social scientists acknowl-
edged that individuals actively construct social realities through discourse (e.g. Billig 1976; Fairclough 1992; Bauman and Briggs 1990; Davies and Harré 1990). Based on the central role given to discourse, this movement has been called the linguistic turn. Discourse is here considered in its broadest sense as any manifestation of language in action. One example of these social realities constructed through discourse is identity. This notion is defined by Kroskrity as “the linguistic construction of membership in one or more social groups or categories” (1999:111). Because of their constructed nature, identities are polyvalent, multiple and highly depending on the creation of a certain “other” (Tajfel and Forgas 1981; Geschiere and Meyer 1998; Pavlenko and Blackledge 2004).

The analysis of space is one field of inquiry where constructivist theory has proven to be useful. In his exemplary work La production de l’espace, published in 1974, Henri Lefebvre undertakes the intellectual enterprise of conceptualizing the constructed nature of space. He refers to the above-mentioned rooted idea of pre-existence, saying that “to speak of ‘producing space’ sounds bizarre, so great is the sway still held by the idea that empty space is prior to whatever ends up filling it” (1991:15). In the pages following this statement, Lefebvre shows why there is no such thing as this “empty space” and that every space is the product of complex cognitive and social processes. Without explicitly using the terms “production” or “construction,” other authors draw on Lefebvre’s theory treating space as an actively constructed entity. Keith and Pile (1993) suggest the term “spatiality” to refer to the ways in which the social and the spatial are simultaneously realized by active subjects. Low and Lawrence-Zúñiga illustrate how individuals attribute meaning to space and in the process “transform ‘space’ into ‘place’” (2003:13). Fernandez points to the pre-existing material dimension of space which he calls “inchoate space” (2003:201). This dimension interacts with elements individuals attribute to space so as to come to a constructed reality. Because of its constructed nature space can have multiple meanings. Rodman calls this “multilocality,” or “the multivocal dimension of place” (2003:212). In my analysis of the construction of space in Yoff, I will show how multilocal aspects become real.

Appadurai (1995), Gupta and Ferguson (1992) and van Binsbergen (1998) examine the construction of space in the context of globalization. They start with the assumption that in a globalized world the unproblematic, self-evident link between identity and place no longer exists. In a world where many people are constantly moving, the socially local is not always the geographically near (van Binsbergen 1998), or in Gupta and Ferguson’s words “the illusion of a natural and essential connection between the place and the culture [is] broken” (1992:10). These authors introduce the forces of imagination and virtuality as counter-weights to this disappearance of evident links. They observe the production of “imagined” (Gupta and Ferguson 1992:10) or
“virtual” (van Binsbergen 1998:876) places as a way to re-invent socially meaningful spaces. One place which seems to generate many imaginings is the rural world. Gupta and Ferguson (1992) cite the idealized notions of the countryside as a critique of urban industrial capitalism. Devisch (1996) and van Binsbergen (1998) describe imaginary representations of the village produced by urbanites in their nostalgic searches for significance and coherence. Processes Devisch refers to as the “villagization of town” (1996:573), can also be found in Yoff.

Imaginary constructions of space do not only exist for rural contexts, but as I will show also for urban ones. Inhabitants create idealized notions of urbanity through their discourse. In order to accurately describe how such constructive actions unfold, I return to Keith and Pile’s (1993) notion of “spatiality.” Spatiality is the human construct that combines geographical features of place with social variables. This construct could be called “spatial identity.” In the current context, geographical characteristics of a particular place are combined with the linguistic habits of its inhabitants to create particular mental images of spaces. Whereas authors cited above observe many different ways to construct this spatiality (monuments, ritual practices), I present an example of its discursive construction. I illustrate how urbanites construct spatialities through their discourses. By talking about different places and choosing from language varieties, these speakers create specific senses of space through the fine-grained techniques offered by discourse.10

The Development of Spatiality in Yoff

The neighborhood of Yoff plays a central role in the construction of its young residents’ social identities. The place presents a sense of belonging, crystallized in the existence of a specific name for its inhabitants, the Yoffois. The fact that it creates a group identity is visible in the ways inhabitants use the words “we” and “our” in their statements about the neighborhood: “we arrange it ourselves we are all kin,” “we who live in Yoff,” or “our neighborhood.”11 Young residents construct a spatial identity based on their neighborhood. Geographical and linguistic criteria constitute central elements in this identity formation. Yoff generates a particular spatiality, a sense of space which structures identity.12 The most important means by which the spatial identity of Yoff is constructed is by contrast to other localities, much like Appadurai (1995) argues that every production of locality implies the generation of context. Residents produce context by constantly opposing “here” to “there,” an opposition which parallels the “we” versus “they” contrast. Yoff is essentially compared to two extreme images: those of the city and the village. On this continuum, Yoff exists somewhere between the two poles. In each of the contrasting operations, Yoff takes on the charac-
characteristics of the opposite image. On the one side it is defined as a village-like space in opposition to the city center, and on the other side it is an urban place in contrast with rural villages. Some informants try to mould these oppositions into a definition of Yoff as an ideal place that combines the best of two worlds: “it is not given to everyone to live in a village that finds itself in a city and that this city is the capital of the country [. . .] we know all the tendencies.”

A noteworthy contrast is established with the city center of Dakar, which is simply called “Dakar” in such contexts. Dakar here is “the city,” whereas Yoff is then called “the village.” “Dakar, it’s a city!” or “over there it’s the city center here it’s a village!” Beside this terminological opposition speakers establish a list of differences between the two places. First there are the different architectural contexts. Yoff residents present housing in the city center as follows: “there, where the people live in apartment buildings,” “in the HLMs [habitation à loyer modéré],” or “one can only live upward.” The contrast with the way of living in Yoff becomes even clearer in the next statement: “the houses that are there are not as large.” Other differences are defined in terms of fashion, infrastructure and atmosphere: “[someone from the city is] well dressed, with suit and tie,” “here you have the beach,” or “here it’s quieter.” The most emphasized difference between the city center and Yoff is the general way of life. Yoff’s way of life is explicitly presented as a “village” one, where aspects of community building and social relations are central. Some of the statements in this respect are: “I say it’s a village in its immaterial elements,” “here at least there is more human warmth,” or “these houses are only separated at the physical level but there is an osmosis at the human level.” An interesting phenomenon here is that informants establish a link between the concept of the village and a sphere of traditionalism.

One young man, Malick, does not use the word traditional, but he implies this contrast with the term “modernizing” in the statement “there are things that stay,” when he says: “it is modernizing, but [. . .] a village, it’s not the housing that makes a locality into a village, it’s more the mentality, it’s the way of living, and there are things that stay.” A young woman, Fatou, is more explicit in her wording: “it’s the community, you could say it’s the village, that’s why we want to keep a certain authenticity,” and “a Lebou village that has managed marvelously to preserve its tradition, its culture.” We note that the name Yoff is often—by inhabitants and by outsiders—accompanied by the qualification “traditional village.” Thus the construction of Yoff as a village-like place is linked to a characterization as “traditional.” In contrast, the city center is presented as a space where modernity has left its marks. Fatou, for example, defines inhabitants of the city center as “modern.” The opposition between the city center and Yoff is filled by the speakers with specific meanings of tradition and modernity. The geographical opposition becomes associated with social meanings. Fernandez (2003)
insists that people and their environment are mutually constitutive. He notes that inhabitants of a certain space ascribe to themselves the characteristics of their place as part of constructing their identities.

Beside these social meanings speakers relate the geographical contrast to a difference in language uses, which brings along more social meanings. Indeed city center residents are said to be much more inclined to speaking French than the Yoffois. When we take the image of the linguistic continuum as presented above, they would lean toward the side of the pure French speakers, or the ones who mix a lot of French words into their Wolof language. They thus coincide with the foreign side of the continuum. The difference between these urbanites and the Yoffois is evaluated in terms of authenticity: because of their linguistic habits urban dwellers are labeled assimilated or uprooted, referring to their assimilation to European culture and their neglect of African culture. The impression that the Yoffois speak less French is then interpreted as a sign of respecting traditions: “with regard to the traditions, those who live in Yoff are much prouder.” Linguistic difference is not a mere technical issue, but evokes a range of cultural associations. This is evident on characterizations of other Dakar neighborhoods. Residential neighborhoods such as Hann-Maristes, Les Almadies and Fann are described as being home to many French speaking Dakarois. Hann-Maristes is even called “the terrain of the French” by one man who adds: “you know over there, to see someone, speak Wolof! Well you are going to walk several kilometers by foot [laughter], I swear it!” This habit of speaking French is ascribed to particular characteristics or ways of life: for example here French has not such a big importance because we live in a community, we are among Lebou, we are not very individualized, we don’t live in chic neighborhoods such as Les Almadies, such as Fann etcetera [laughter]. We live in a community, we speak Lebou all the time we go everywhere, we live in solidarity.

This quote discloses interesting dichotomies by showing a complex combination of place, language and social meanings: “here” versus “Les Almadies/Fann,” “Lebou” versus “French,” “community/solidarity” versus “individualized/chic.”

Yoff is constructed as a space very different from the city center. In this construction geographical criteria are combined with linguistic ones, all implying socially meaningful associations. Speakers engage in a series of dichotomous positionings: city versus village, modernity versus tradition, individualism versus solidarity, a foreign language versus an indigenous one, assimilation versus authenticity. We recognize the imaginary and idealistic presentation of the rural world as described by Devisch (1996) and van Binsbergen (1998). Yoff is con-
structured as the place where the great values of village life are combined, as opposed to urban spaces where traditions and cultural authenticity have been lost.

A second spatial opposition is realized with regard to the image of rural villages. Here, speakers engage in exactly the opposite identity statements as those examined above. Now they emphasize the urban aspects of Yoff. When confronted with questions evoking more characteristic rural settings, Yoff residents suddenly start shifting to the other side of the continuum, moving toward the urban pole. Now the remote villages become one pole and neighborhoods of the Dakar agglomeration which they consider as more village-like become the other pole. When contrasting Yoff with the city center, the neighborhood was firmly defined as a traditional village, now speakers step away from this standpoint when they characterize Yoff in contrast to the typical rural Senegalese village. Speakers reposition their identity as they now stress the urban character of their neighborhood. Once again we note the association of the village with the concept of tradition as opposed to an urbanity linked to modernity. When I ask Aminata whether she has the feeling of living in a village, she answers negatively by stating: “like in the villages there are huts, traditional things but here you have everything! There are even shopping malls! [. . .] nowadays it has modernized.” Since she associates the village with a notion of traditionalism, she wants to prove that Yoff does not fit into this characterization. She tries to describe Yoff by elements that are considered typically urban, like buildings or institutions. The use of the word “even” illustrates that she sees shopping malls as a strong form of urbanity. Other informants also challenge the village-definition of Yoff: “well we can no longer speak of the Yoff traditional village but we speak of the Yoff district,” [E: “you really think it’s a village here?”] “well eh, it is in the process of modernizing itself.” The rural village is presented as a space very different from Yoff, mainly in its material aspects: “first of all there is no electricity,” “no television no radio,” or “no nightclubs,” but also in the nature of its inhabitants: “it’s very natural,” or “the people are very simple.” Rather striking is the statement by Fatou, the same girl who eloquently praised Yoff’s village atmosphere in contrast with the city center: “the city, when you live in the city there is no problem but when you live eh [laughter] in the outback it’s difficult because I have difficulties seeing myself eh [laughter] living in a hut, making sorghum with a pounder, going to draw water from a well.” In spite of her previous adoration of village life, her affection toward it seems to dissolve here. Thus the construction of an ideal village reality mainly served to oppose the city center life which she firmly condemns. The imaginary presentation of the village environment is a mechanism to react against other contexts.

Other instances of contrast are more village-like neighborhoods in Dakar. These are all original Lebou places, neighborhoods like Ouakam, N’Gor or Bargny, or sections of Yoff such as Yoff Tonghor or Yoff
Ndenate. They are described as more village-like and more traditional than Yoff Mbuenguene, where the informants live. In contrast to places like N’Gor or Ouakam, my informants stress the urban elements of Yoff, such as “the motorway,” “the dormitory suburbs” and “the airport.” They also indicate the less traditional character of Yoff: “they still preserve their culture, whereas here in Yoff, it tends to disappear, whereas in the other Lebou villages it’s still there. [. . .] Here it is a little bit more modern I would say.” Within Yoff they make a spatial distinction between their own and other sections, once again based on differences between modernity and tradition, as the following quotes illustrates: “besides they distinguish themselves a little bit from us [laughter]. They say that we are a little bit more modern than they are, that’s what they say.”

Speakers clearly recognize the geographical separation between neighborhoods, by using terms such as “on this side” and “on the other side.” This imagined frontier is visualized by the absence or presence of fishermen’s boats on the beach: “but you can see it! When you go to the beach, where do the boats stop? [. . .] The lines of boats, they stop there. [. . .] That explains everything.” The fact that the inhabitants of these neighborhoods are more “traditional” is attributed to the circumstance that these neighborhoods are situated more closely to the sea, which is considered a crucial element in the Lebou tradition: “they are much closer to the sea.” Their relation to the sea is also taken as an explanation for the habit of polygamy: “especially on the side of Tonghor and Ndenate, the neighborhoods that are situated over there, the majority are fishermen.” The geographical opposition between the speakers’ neighborhood and other places becomes socially meaningful because of the associations that are established.

Geographical and social oppositions to the “rural” are once again accompanied by linguistic evaluations. A key element in these evaluations is the Urban Wolof code. Speakers link this code to their place of residence in order to mark contrasts with other spatial contexts. Here again the linguistic continuum comes into play. The Yoffois situate themselves more toward the French side of the continuum than the rural inhabitants, stating that they mix far more French vocabulary in their Wolof than their rural co-patriots. The village then becomes the locus of the purest indigenous language forms. Situating themselves at a distance to remote rural villages, speakers align themselves with all residents of metropolitan Dakar by subscribing to a common way of speaking: “the Wolof that we speak,” “because in Dakar we mainly speak Franwofof, it’s in the inland of Senegal that people only speak Wolof,” “the Wolof from Dakar is very different from Diolof [laughter], because there it’s much purer then here. [. . .] In Dakar we have a broken Wolof,” or “in the city, the Cap-Vert peninsula in general, we speak Wolof but it’s a diluted Wolof.” Some speakers relate this influence of the French language to the history of Dakar as one of the four colonial
communes (beside Rufisque, Gorée and St. Louis) where after 1916 residents automatically received French citizenship.

This constitutes an interesting switch in identity positioning: where before speakers clearly positioned themselves as very different from the inhabitants of the city center, they now situate themselves in one group together with all the Dakarois. The use of “we” in these utterances shows that a group identity is constructed here. Moreover, the existence of a specific term, “the Wolof from Dakar,” indicates that the Urban Wolof variety is a strong marker of a particular Dakar identity. In opposition to other Lebou neighborhoods the contrast lies in the degree of mixture with French vocabulary. Inhabitants of these neighborhoods are said to speak a purer Lebou or Wolof: “they speak the real Lebou,” and “when you go to Ndenate over there, you can be sure that you are going to hear Lebou, because over there they are also a little bit rooted in that.” These linguistic differences are associated with differences in formal education: “the language register you speak in the city, or to an educated person, it will not at all be the same as when I speak to a farmer,” “when you go to Ndenate, you speak French to someone, they say you get out of here, you want to show us that you are educated whereas we, we aren’t,” and “you almost have those who are from this side, well beginning from the niayes, it’s from the niayes on that you start finding the intellectuals! But the other side, that side there, these are fishermen.” Here language differences related to geographical distance are given social meaning.

There is a striking shift in the positioning of Yoff toward the urban extreme of the continuum city—village. When differentiating themselves from more “rural” dwellers, speakers construct a spatial identity that is marked by aspects of urbanity and modernity. Geographical definitions are again accompanied by linguistic ones, where Yoff is situated toward the more foreign end of the linguistic continuum. Both definitions become saturated with social meanings to construct a sense of space and identity.

Modernity and Tradition

The relationship between modernity and tradition in Africa has been thoroughly studied in postcolonial and anthropological research. Some polemics appear in such discussions. First, there is the discussion about the vagueness surrounding the two concepts. Many attempts have been made to accurately define tradition and modernity, but none have been completely persuasive. In spite of (poststructuralist) critiques on these notions, we find ourselves faced with the inescapability of continuing to work with them (Gikandi 2002; Knöbl 2002). In this section I want to turn to a central issue that arises in debates on modernity, to do with the “ownership” of modernity. As Mbembe
(2001) rightly indicates, modernity has almost always been situated in a threefold constellation together with rationalism and “Westernism.” The notion of modernity is so closely linked to Western social and philosophical transformations that the question arises whether an African modernity is at all possible (Mbembe 2001; Gikandi 2002; Knöbl 2002; Cooper 2005). Gikandi (2002) notes that this question has often been answered negatively, precisely because of the need of Western modernity to define itself by an opposition with its other, in this case a profoundly traditional Africa. This would preclude an African modernity. Yet Gikandi argues that it is at the same time imperative, since we can only think of Africa through the institutions and philosophies which the modern project has imposed on it. This leads Gikandi to ask: “Why was the African theoretically excluded from modernity but politically forced into its institutional apparatus?” (2002:143). One solution has been to talk about “multiple modernities,” among which “African modernities” can be classified. These are seen as an alternative path toward innovation which does not simply copy Western-style modernity but creates its own modes of renewal. Either the term can be interpreted as a set of attributes which are considered modern and have been present in parts of Africa long before the West interfered, such as movement, material progress, technological innovation and intellectual endeavors (Rathbone 2002). Or it can be understood as a way of innovation, somehow inspired by Western modernity but with its own emphases and particularities (Probst, Deutsch and Schmidt 2002; Knöbl 2002; Cooper 2005). Although the term has also been subject to thorough critique, it offers a way of thinking about modernity in Africa that implies agency and creativity. However, as Mbembe indicates, this new concept does not impede contemporary African debates on modernity to continue to revolve around questions of authenticity and alienation. My data suggest that in Dakar modernity is surrounded by images of the Western world. “Modern” people are said to be “assimilated,” as opposed to “traditional” citizens who lay claim to “authenticity.”

Setting aside the question of who owns modernity, it is clear that modernity and tradition do not exclude each other in Africa. Geschiere (1997) recounts how traditional practices combine with modern changes in Cameroonian society. Although modernity and tradition are often seen as opposed to each other, African communities show how they co-exist without contradiction. Geschiere argues that this combination of modernity and tradition is not exclusive for Africa, but can be found in other continents. Knöbl (2002) argues modern societies always represent a complex blend of modern and traditional elements. Geschiere shows how tradition takes on special forms in urban environments. In the case of Yaoundé he notes that, “this urban witchcraft culture is, moreover, increasingly commercialised or, better yet, ‘commodified’. The bufe (fetishes) are sold on the market, and witch doctors
sell their services to the highest bidder” (1997:114). In his study on the city of Pikine, Gérard Salem (1998) indicates that the difficulties of urban life lead to the emergence of modified traditions. He concludes that it would be incorrect to think that the city as a site of modernity eradicates all forms of traditional life. This holds true for Dakar, where the presence of tradition can hardly be ignored. But as intertwined as the two phenomena of modernity and tradition may be in this city, the discourses produced by city dwellers reinstall a strong dichotomy between them. The inhabitants of Yoff create an opposition between tradition and modernity when discussing urban spaces. This opposition is not a construct developed by those who do not have the experience of living in the two realities at once. My research suggests that individuals who combine traditional and modern elements on a daily basis seem to feel the need to distinguish them in their discourse. This shows how strong the conceptual difference is between notions of modernity and tradition. Even when people experience both tradition and modernity in an everyday manner, they still construct the two realities in their discourses as strongly disparate.

Conclusion

I have argued that social identity is actively constructed in discourse. Speakers create group identities by defining a certain “we” alliance as opposed to a partially imagined “they.” They use discourse to accomplish this constructive action. Speakers outline group affiliations in two closely linked domains: the geographic and the linguistic. These two domains work together and become intertwined to establish a particular social identity, referred to in this paper as “spatiality.” In the multilingual context of Dakar various urban places receive different identities in this way. Space is thus imagined through the creative tool of discourse, blending questions on where one lives and how one speaks into “who one is.” In the suburban neighborhood of Yoff Mbuenguene, inhabitants shift constantly between the label of “urbanites” and “village people.” This active shifting illustrates the dynamic and fluid nature of identity, continuously subject to diverging contrasting positions. In the case of Yoff these contrasting positions are taken up against two iconized extremes of a continuum: the city and the village. When opposing themselves alternatively to these two extremes, inhabitants show that they are able to take up both positions and construct an identity that reflects “the best of both worlds.” The continuum city—village is not only defined in geographical terms, but is also realized through linguistic terms, ranging from the “foreign” French language to the “indigenous” Senegalese languages. Both the geographical and the linguistic indicators are associated with cultural concepts of modernity and tradition, which in turn are accompanied by value judgments of authenticity. The
informants situate themselves somewhere between the French speaking, “assimilated,” “modern” urbanites living in the center of Dakar and the indigenous language speaking, “authentic,” “traditional” people in Senegal’s rural villages. The key aspect of this position is mixture, both in the material environment and the ephemeral manifestations of spoken language.

The question remains as to why informants construct these shifting identities. This is a difficult question as it transcends the terrain of discursive data and enters into the sphere of mental dispositions. Thus I can only briefly speculate here. I do not think shifting identities themselves are a characteristic of this particular environment. Instead, as many identity studies illustrate, shifting identities are a standard characteristic of social identity construction. People tend to construct variable identities as functions of their discursive goals. In the case of Dakar, the goal was to emphasize the contrasts with other Senegalese, at one moment the inhabitants of the city center and at another one the rural residents. In this light we can understand why the inhabitants of Yoff Mbuenguene shift between these identities: they want to create an exclusive spatial identity which enables them to distinguish themselves from many other social groups in their surrounding. Studies which claim that shifting or multiple identities are specific to postcolonial or “third world” contexts should be read with caution. Shifting identities are as typical of Northern individuals as of those in the South. However, the context and form of shifting is unique to each case. In the case of Yoff, the shifting along the village-city continuum can be interpreted as a specific phenomenon. It is inspired by the unique situation and history of the Yoff neighborhood. Beside this history, the close relationship between the city and the village is characteristic of African urban life, where urbanization is relatively recent and urban dwellers remain in close contact with their village kin. In African urban environments, village architecture and ways of living are frequently reproduced in the city. It is thus not surprising to see that inhabitants of Yoff construct their spatial identities precisely between the images of the village and the city. The Yoffois create their self image with the available building blocks: on the one side an explicit, historically inspired village context and on the other one the new and equally alive urban environment.

Notes

1 Given the small amount of research informants, it is important to stress here that this study is an analysis of individual representations and not of the whole of the neighborhood.

2 Age is not a central criterion in the research. Since I have no data from older people I can not make any presumption on what makes these data specific for urban youth.

Some squatter settlements are located in the heart of residential areas,
occupying rough terrains which constitute gaps in the urban grid.

The same phenomenon of Lebou villages being incorporated in an urban
expansion is discussed by Salem (1998) in his study on Pikine, a town situated
in the Dakar agglomeration.

In the case of Yoff this fusion is caused by the specific local history. Other
forms of ambiguity can be found throughout Dakar, like the combination of
formal and informal economic activities and contrasts in urban development
(Simone 2004).

The question whether the Wolof can be considered a separate ethnic
group gives rise to many debates, not only in academic circles but also in the
everyday talk in Senegal. As is thoroughly indicated in African studies, ethnic
boundaries were often constructed by colonial ideology (see McLaughlin 2008
and Versluys, in press).

For an overview of ethnic languages in Dakar, see Dreyfus and Juillard
(2004).

It should be noted that among these voices which construct space figures
the anthropologist’s one. As Low and Lawrence-Zúñiga (2003) and Rodman
(2003) show, anthropologists themselves often construct specific spaces in
their ethnographic studies. In this paper I myself have constructed the space
Yoff Mbuenguene by delimiting it as an object of study and by describing its
features.

Beside these spatial identities urban dwellers can construct a variety of
other affiliations in function of their urban identity, such as religious or eco-
nomic ones (for the religious dimension of urban identity in Yoff, see Laborde
1996).

I have translated all excerpts from the French originals.

An additional element in this spatial identity is the Lebou ethnicity.
Yoff is one of the original settlements of the Lebou people and figures in
all the foundation stories of the Lebou tradition. Spatial identity con-
structed here concern more people than only the inhabitants of Lebou
descent.

All personal names are pseudonyms.

Hann-Maristes is the residential part of the Hann neighborhood, situated
at the Eastern seaside of the Cap-Vert peninsula. Les Almadies lies at the
extreme North-West side of the peninsula and is a relatively recent neighbor-
hood inhabited by “les nouveaux riches.” And Fann is one of the older and
central neighborhoods. It hosts the University of Dakar and homes of expatri-
ates and diplomats.

Although the use of dichotomies like these certainly contains an
unpleasant resemblance with simplistic structuralist analyses, I do think it is
valuable to reveal them for they are so explicitly constructed by the informants
themselves.

The niayes is an area flooded by groundwater of which several examples
can be found in Dakar. The recording of this piece of the interview is not very
clear, so there is also a possibility the informant pronounces the name Ndiaye.
In this case he would refer to a large Lebou family to which some of the
informants belong. They own a typical family house in the Yoff Mbuenguene neighborhood, situated close to the border with the Ndenate neighborhood.


References

Appadurai, Arjun

Bauman, Richard and Charles Briggs

Billig, Michael

Binsbergen, Wim van

Calvet, Louis-Jean

Cooper, Frederick

Cruise O’Brien, Donald

Davies, Bronwyn and Rom Harré

De Boeck, Filip and Marie-Françoise, Plissart

Devisch, René

Dreyfus, Martine and Caroline Juillard

Dumez, Richard

Fairclough, Norman

Fernandez, José
Figari, Sylvette

Geschiere, Peter

Geschiere, Peter and Birgit Meyer

Gikandi, Simon

Governmental website of Senegal: www.gouv.sn

Gupta, Akhil and James Ferguson

Keith, Michael and Steve Pile

Knöbl, Wolfgang

Kroskrity, Paul

Laborde, Cécile

Lefebvre, Henri

Low, Setha M. and Denise Lawrence-Zúñiga

Mbare, Achille

McLaughlin, Fiona

Pavlenko, Aneta and Adrian Blackledge
2004 Introduction: New Theoretical Approaches to the Study of Negotiation of Identities in Multilingual Contexts. In Negotiation of Identities...

Probst, Peter, Jan-Georg Deutsch and Heike Schmidt

Rathbone, Richard

Rodman, Margaret C.

Salem, Gérard

Simone, Abdou Maliq

Swigart, Leigh

Tajfel, Henri and Joseph P. Forgas

Thiam, Ndiassé

Versluys, Eline